



## 94: Thank You for (Not) Smoking by cali-chan

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## 94: Thank You for (Not) Smoking

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*In which Mike accidentally lets it slip that smoking cigarettes causes lung cancer, and Eleven does not take it well. Not even a little bit.*

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Mike wasn't even aware of the implications of those words when he said them. Honestly, he was just excited that his mother wasn't going to be dragging him all the way to Florida to visit his grandmother this year.

They'd just been let out for the summer on his last year of middle school, and on top of the normal ebullience any teenager would feel in those circumstances, Mike was extra happy because no school meant he got to see El more often at the cabin. What used to be something like twice-weekly visits became once-every-other-day events, particularly since all their friends were similarly available and he didn't have to compete with homework to get them to come with.

That day, however, was a Sunday, so Hopper was home to supervise, and Mike was allowed to come over on his own. He sat in the living area with El, who was working on a practice essay (her high school entrance exams were coming up in late July/early August), some old music he didn't recognize serving as background noise via Hopper's record player because she wasn't allowed to turn on the TV until her schoolwork was finished.

Hopper was in the kitchen, which wasn't too far away from them considering the size of the cabin, but he was too busy singing along while he cooked lunch to pay attention to what the two of them were doing. (Mike figured he was probably making sandwiches or canned soup because, as far as he had gathered, those were the only two decent non-breakfast meals he knew how to make without having to fall back on TV dinners).

Mike was supposed to be working on a campaign in an effort not to distract El from her work, but he didn't care for Hopper's taste in music and he'd never been good with silence, so without even really noticing what he was doing, he started talking about what he and the rest of the party usually did during summer break, and how much fun El was going to have if she was allowed to come hang out with them like Hopper had (kind of, sort of, maybe) insinuated she might be.

El was dividing her attention evenly between her work and his tirade, looking up from her notebook whenever something he said caught her attention, all the while smiling at him and nodding when appropriate. He knew he was probably slowing her down (his campaign was similarly paused about three paragraphs in), but she seemed to like hearing him talk, so he wasn't going to feel guilty about it unless Hopper told him to shut up.

"...Max said she was going back to California to visit her dad at some point, and I think Dustin has a family reunion at the beach or something for the 4th of July, but otherwise I'm pretty sure we'll all be around all summer," he explained with some relief. "I'm just glad we're not visiting grandma this year. That's the *worst*," he added.

Normally, the entire Wheeler troupe traveled to Florida for two weeks during the summer so they could see his mom's mom at least once a year. Since Mike's grandpa died, his grandma lived in a small group home for seniors in Boca, and going down there to visit her was always a production. If it wasn't their mom packing way too much for a two-week stay and still managing to forget important stuff, it was Mike and Nancy bickering the entire way there and their dad yelling at them to shut up so he could listen to the news on the radio, or even having to stop at every other rest stop on the way to change Holly's diapers. It wasn't a process Mike enjoyed in the least.

This year, however, Nancy was starting her senior year, Mike was starting high school, and Holly was starting kindergarten, so they had a lot to get ready for. Plus, his dad had... some work thing he couldn't miss (Mike didn't ask) on top of helping Nancy study the *seventy billion* college info bulletins she'd asked for, so his mom had decided that this year she'd go down to Florida on her own, stay only for a couple of days, and come back before they lost too much time. Mike had been ecstatic when she made the announcement one night during

dinner.

El, however, didn't know what those yearly trips were like, had never interacted with his family other than Nancy, and didn't really understand what was so bad about seeing your relatives, so it was no wonder she gave him a confused look. "Why the worst?" she asked, curious.

Mike sighed. He didn't want to make it sound like his family was awful or anything, but... "Well, it's just boring, I guess," he said with a shrug. "We can't watch TV because all they want to watch is the news, the food tastes like cardboard, my parents won't even let us go to the beach after that one time I burned so badly they had to treat it as a second-degree burn..."

El's eyes widened in alarm, and Mike hurried to push the conversation far, far away from that particular mortifying moment from his childhood. Perhaps that's why he let slip what he did. "Anyway, it's just boring. There's no one to hang out with except a bunch of old people, and even when it's just us and Grandma, Mom will spend the entire time nagging her about how her smoking is going to kill her," he finished with a shake of his head, picking up his pencil and going back to his DM binder and the campaign he'd left half-finished.

He was just starting to erase the last sentence he'd written ("No trolls, trolls are overdone") when he heard her ask: "Smoking... kills?"

He should've looked up at her then, especially considering how tentative she sounded— El was so impressionable. Really, he should've known. But he was still embarrassed about the burn thing, so he didn't. Instead, he shrugged and said, "Yeah, it gives you cancer and stuff."

She didn't ask any further questions, so he thought nothing of it. Sure, she was quiet after that, but El was quiet most of the time, so that wasn't out of the ordinary. And then Hopper called them both to the table for lunch, so it's not like he had much time to ponder on it.

He certainly wasn't thinking about that at all when he made his way to the cabin with Will the following Tuesday. They were animatedly

talking about video games as they walked up the porch steps, to the point that Mike did the secret knock almost absentmindedly. It was early, so he was waiting for Eleven to unlock the door with her powers, and he was snapped out of the conversation midsentence when he saw that it was Hopper who opened the door, instead.

Hopper, who was supposed to be at work at that hour. Why wasn't he at work? "Is something wrong?" Mike immediately asked, alarm rising unbidden in him as he spoke. "Is El okay? What's going on?"

If anything urgent was happening, Hopper didn't show it; instead, he leaned against the doorframe, effectively blocking them from entering the cabin, and looked Mike up and down like he was covered in bugs somehow. "Nothing's wrong," the man said in his usual gruff tone. "I just don't feel like letting you visit today."

Mike felt like someone had pulled a rug from under his feet. "What? Why!" he exclaimed, instantaneously feeling his hackles rise. This again? He thought he and Hopper had already come to an agreement about visits. So how come he had to keep fighting this fight every other month? "I haven't done anything wrong! We literally just got here," he pointed out with a glare, signaling at himself and Will, who was standing closer to the railing in the corner, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

"Yeah, *today*," the police chief retorted with a glare of his own. "But turns out last week you told *my kid* that cigarettes cause cancer," he explained further in a hard tone, "and next thing I know, El's flushing every single pack of smokes in the cabin down the toilet and locking herself in her room for the next two days. How's *that* for a reason?" he finished, pinning the boy in place with his gaze alone.

Mike's mind flashed back to that moment on Sunday only briefly, and he had the decency of feeling sheepish for a second, but he wasn't about to just concede Hopper's point and go home. "Yeah, well, she had to learn about it eventually, didn't she?" he threw back with a frown, feeling a little indignant for El at what he perceived as Hopper treating her like a baby. She was fourteen; they didn't have to hide stuff like that from her, they just had to explain them.

Hopper's jaw clenched. "Not helping your case, Wheeler," he warned

in a growl.

Mike huffed. "Fine, so then let me explain it to her," he offered, willing to do anything he had to do in order to be able to see El.

Hopper wasn't budging. "Hell no. I think you've done enough damage for one day, so from now on, I'm handling this—"

"Do you even know how cancer works? I'm an A+ student in science." Mike threw back, incensed. Hopper said nothing, but Mike realized his point had hit home, and he deflated a little; he didn't want to come off as an asshole either. "You're right, I should've been more careful with what I said," he added, showing some contrition. "Please let me explain it to her. She's probably just confused."

They remained like that for a moment, Hopper glaring and Mike hopeful, the only movement around them Will's head turning slightly from side to side as he looked from one to the other. Then Hopper sighed. "Fine," he conceded, reluctantly pulling back to open the door wider and let them pass.

Mike wasted no time making his way inside, but halfway to El's door, he paused and turned back toward Hopper. "I'm not going to lie to her," he declared, determined. Hopper was a grown-up, just like Mike's grandma, and if he wanted to smoke knowing the risks, that was his choice. But he wasn't going to spin El some story just to make it sound harmless.

It was Hopper's turn to huff. "Just get her to come out of the room, okay?" he instructed with a roll of his eyes. "Preferably without breaking any of my windows," he added hurriedly. "I'm gonna have to invest in some of that damn poly-whatsit thing Owens was talking about..." he finished in a mumble, and Mike had no idea what he was talking about, but he wasn't paying attention anymore by that point.

He heard the front door close, so he assumed Will had come in, but he was busy knocking on El's door. "El?" he asked, mouth close to the wood grain, after knocking twice. "It's me. Mike. Can you let me in? I want to talk to you about something."

The sound of the lock coming off gave him the signal to turn the door

handle, and he walked in without a pause. He intended to leave the door open— because Hopper still had *rules* and Mike had already pushed them too far today— but was startled when it slammed closed on its own, or rather with a little telekinetic help, right behind him.

Oh, well. Hopper couldn't blame him if it was *El* who closed it, right?

He turned his gaze away from the door just in time to catch El's upset expression for a millisecond before she threw herself into his arms. "Mike," she whispered against his ear, her voice catching. "Hopper's going to die," she clearly sobbed, and okay, *now* Mike really felt like an ass. He could feel droplets falling onto his shoulder— he'd made her cry. God, he was such an idiot.

"No. No, he's not going to die," he assured her as he wrapped his arms around her tightly, trying to calm her down. "I'm sorry, I didn't— I shouldn't have told you that..." he admitted, shaking his head as best he could from within their embrace.

She sniffled and pulled her head back just slightly so she could look him in the eye. "Not true?" she asked him with a small frown marking her features, a familiar one she always got whenever there was something she didn't understand.

"No!" Mike hurried to clarify. "I wasn't lying— I wouldn't do that to you," he strongly emphasized that last sentence. "But... there's a bit more to it than that. I should've explained." He lifted his hands to wipe the tears from her cheeks. "Can I explain now?"

She nodded, looking a little more hopeful now, and pulled him by the hand so they could both sit on her bed. He tried not to blush, as it really was the only place they could sit in her room, but he could still feel the tell-tale heat in his cheeks. But she was looking at him with those big brown eyes of hers, so trusting, so he steeled his resolve and started speaking, explaining at least as well as he himself understood it.

Thankfully, El had been studying up tirelessly through the year in order to catch up with her friends at high school level, and with a lot of reading and plenty of tutoring from Nancy and the boys, she actually had a fairly good grasp of science for a kid her age. Mike



didn't have to make his explanation too basic to get her to understand; she knew what cells were, what each organ did, how each system in the human body worked. She even had a rudimentary understanding of what cancer was— just not how or why it came about.

"So then there's cigarettes," Mike said once he got to the point where she understood the generalities of cancer. "The stuff inside them, it contains a lot of gunk that sometimes goes into people's lungs, and it can cause cancer. But it doesn't happen straight away— it takes *years* — and it's not always a sure thing," he finally came to the heart of the matter. "Sometimes people who smoke never get cancer. And sometimes people who don't smoke *do*. Plus, there are lots of other types of cancer that can just... happen. Scientists don't really know why."

El still seemed wary, hugging her stuffed bear to herself. "But if he stops now... he won't get it?" she asked, wide-eyed.

Mike shrugged. "Maybe. He'll have less of a chance," he informed her. "That's what the doctors say, at least... like, if you eat well and exercise, and quit smoking... but quitting isn't easy," he pointed out quickly before she could get her hopes up. "People have a really hard time with it. Sometimes if they do it too fast, they start feeling sick, or angry, or get headaches and stuff." He could see from Eleven's face that she didn't really understand that part. "It's because there's stuff inside the cigarette that stays in their blood and it makes them want to smoke more. Does that make sense?"

She was silent for a moment, processing this information, but finally she decided it did. "Hopper gets cranky if he runs out," she stated with a solemn nod of her head.

That made Mike chuckle. "Crankier than usual?"

El laughed, too, for the first time since he had come in. "Yes," she replied, still giggling. But the mirth died down quickly enough. "I was bad, wasn't I?" she asked in a mumble, looking down at her hands as if ashamed, and probably referring to her purge of every pack of Marlboros within the confines of her home.

"No, El..." Mike scooted a little closer to her on the bed— at least as close as her crossed legs allowed— and put a hand on hers where they rested atop her plush bear. "You were just scared. There's nothing wrong with that. And Hopper probably *should* start smoking less, let's be real," he added as an aside, which in turn made El chuckle. "But if you really want to help him do that... maybe you should start by talking to him."

She nodded. "Okay," she agreed, but she was still looking down at her lap. "I..." She pursed her lips and Mike was dismayed to see fresh tears gathering at the corner of her eyes. "I can't lose him," she admitted in a tremulous whisper, finally raising her gaze to meet his, her expression distraught. "I don't wanna be alone again," she said as the tears started to run down her cheeks once more, and Mike hurried forward so he could wrap her in his arms.

"You won't be," he affirmed with conviction, lightly running his hand through her hair as she sniffled against his t-shirt. "You'll *never* have to be alone again, El. The lab is gone, you're *free*, and you have— you have people who love you now. Like— like Hopper, and the party, and— and me..."

He stumbled a little over his words there, but he continued on with aplomb. He'd have time to think about it later; right now the most important thing was to make her feel better. "And we're never going to leave you, okay? We won't. You don't have to be afraid of that, I promise."

She nodded against his shoulder but otherwise remained quiet. He kept touching her hair and rubbing her back as the only sound in the room was her sniffing as she endeavored to stop crying. It took a couple of minutes, but eventually she pulled back, wiping the moisture from her cheeks with one hand while the other one hung onto the fabric of Mike's t-shirt.

"Thank you," she told him with a wobbly smile, and then she leaned forward to press her lips against his so softly that for a second Mike thought he had imagined it.

But he hadn't, and as she pulled back and her eyes locked with his, he could hear the loud drumbeat of his suddenly flustered heart in his

ears. "El..." he uttered out of his unexpectedly parched throat, and without even realizing it, he found himself slowly leaning in...

...only to jump back a foot when three loud knocks resounded against the door. "Hey! Are you two coming out, or what?" came Hopper's voice almost in a bark. Mike wasn't sure how long they'd been in there, but it was clearly long enough for Hopper's patience to run out.

Mike and El exchanged a look before she sighed, giving in. "Be right out," she called back at her guardian, getting up off the bed with a groan before extending a hand to Mike. He took it, letting her pull him to his feet and lead him outside.

When they crossed the doorway, Mike saw that Will was sitting on the couch; he turned his gaze away from the TV when the two of them made their appearance. Hopper was standing in front of their little dining table, still looking severe as he crossed his arms and leaned his weight against the wooden edge. Mike let go of Eleven's hand and moved to sit on the armrest of the couch as she stood in front of Hopper, thumbs in the pockets of her jean shorts.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, looking more down at the table than at Hopper's face. She might've understood, but that didn't mean apologizing was easy; Mike could relate. "I shouldn't have thrown out your cigarettes."

Hopper stared at her for a moment before speaking. "That's right, you shouldn't have." He straightened up, pushing away from the table. "I hope you've learned your lesson, though. This is something you're going to need to know when you're allowed out, El; you can't just take people's things just because you think you're right."

She looked up at him for a split second before dodging her gaze again, and then she nodded. Hopper sighed. "Okay. We'll discuss a suitable punishment for your attitude when I get back from work, then. I'm already late."

He had just turned to grab his car keys from the table when Eleven spoke up again. "You have to quit smoking," she declared, and this time she was looking straight at him, unflinching.

Hopper paused, turned back around in their direction again, and glared at Mike. Mike shrugged; he'd already told the man he wasn't about to lie. Hopper lifted a hand to rub his forehead like he had a headache before looking at Eleven again. "It's not that easy," he warned her.

"I know. Mike said," she replied straight away. Then she crossed her arms. "Compromise."

Hopper sighed again and ran a hand through his hair. "All right," he muttered as a start. "Flo's been bugging me about this, too, so I guess I could kill two birds with one stone if I start cutting back," he conceded. "How's that for halfway happy?"

El nodded. "Halfway happy." She looked at Hopper for a moment longer, as if unsure of what to do now that they'd come to an agreement. And then she sniffled. "You can't die," she stated, her voice shaky. "You just became Dad."

Most people wouldn't have noticed it, but Mike had (by default) spent a lot of time with the chief since November, so he could see straight away how the man's entire disposition just *softened* at Eleven's words. Part of him wondered if that was the first time she'd called him that; he knew they'd been talking about it because Eleven had mentioned it to him a few weeks earlier.

Eleven was going to be starting school in the fall, and Hopper thought it might invite questions from people if she called him "Hopper," like she had so far, instead of a more fatherly term. El had asked Mike what other ways people called their fathers, to see if one of them would feel more comfortable to her, but Mike hadn't been very helpful with his response. "I just call my dad 'Dad,'" he had replied with a shrug. "I don't know why. I never really thought about it."

Clearly she had decided that "Dad" suited Hopper just fine, and it seemed like Hopper was pretty okay with it himself. "Hey... come here, kiddo," he said, crouching down a little as he signaled for her to come closer because he was so much taller than her.

El walked straight to him and wrapped her arms around the man's

waist, burying her face in the fabric of his uniform. Hopper drew her to him tightly with one hand, while the other ran over the crown of her head in a soothing manner. Mike smiled as he watched, happy that what he'd told her earlier was true: El had many people who loved her now. He was glad. She deserved all the love in the world.

"You don't have to worry about me, okay?" Hopper said before dropping a kiss on her curly hair. "I'm the parent and you're the kid. You let me do the worrying." El nodded against his chest. "And I'm always going to be around, all right? I'm like a weed that way, you can't get rid of me. Hell, I'll be around so much you'll be begging me to go away soon enough, I'm sure."

Mike did a great job pretending Hopper wasn't looking straight at him when he said that, but Will definitely noticed it— he was still sitting close by and watching everything with as much interest—because he let out a snort.

Eleven, for her part, shook her head, as if the mere idea of telling Hopper to go away was unfathomable now. She pulled back, wiping her tears again, and Hopper smiled down at her. "Listen... what do you say I come home early today and bring back sweets and things so we can have an Eggo dessert night? That sound fun?"

It was Mike's turn to snort; when *his* parents got mad at him for doing something wrong, they didn't end up giving him treats. Hopper was so whipped. (Then again, who was he to talk? He himself would give an arm and a leg if it meant making El smile).

On cue, a big, bright grin drew itself on El's lips, and she nodded. "For them, too?" she asked, turning to signal toward Mike and Will expectantly.

"I have to be home for dinner," Will chimed in from the couch, speaking out loud for the first time since they arrived, at least as far as Mike was aware.

"I don't," Mike input for himself with a shrug. It's not like his mother would care, anyway; these days she pretty much assumed he'd be staying "at his friends" until late, since there was no school. His response made El smile enthusiastically.

"Of course you don't..." Hopper muttered resignedly under his breath. He grabbed his keys off the table. "All right, I'll be back by six. Will, you can bike home once I get back. I'm leaving you in charge."

Mike scoffed while El and Will laughed, the latter giving Hopper a salute in between chuckles. The chief, also somewhat amused, turned to Eleven again. "No more crying, okay?" he told her with a pointed look. She agreed.

Once Hopper was out the door, the three teens moved to the couch to watch TV— or at least pretend to watch TV, in Will and Mike's case, since the only thing that was on before lunchtime was daytime soaps. El was quite happy to watch along, leaning her head against Mike's shoulder.

Will leaned forward to see Mike take Eleven's hand and intertwine his fingers with hers. "Should I be saying 'hands to yourselves'?" Will asked, biting his lip to keep from laughing. It burst past his lips anyway at Mike's annoyed expression; when even Will got in on the teasing, he knew he was screwed. "What? Hopper said I'm your chaperone."

Mike groaned, throwing his head back so that his cheek rested against El's hair. "Next time you should flush Hopper's lighter instead," he mumbled disgruntledly, but his tone made El giggle, so the momentary grumpiness didn't last long.

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**Notes:** God, that ending is *awful*, but I had to give poor Will some input there. xD The polycarbonate bit was included because I am a giant nerd and tend to be the only person in any given room who laughs whenever I rewatch episode 2x08 and hear Owens mention it. Also, the anecdote Mike mentions about getting a 2nd-degree burn at the beach may or may not have been partially inspired by real-life experience (\*cough cough\* my own \*cough cough\* #PalePeopleProblems).

The first major scientific studies linking tobacco smoking and lung cancer were published in the 1950s. By 1964, the US Surgeon General officially declared cigarette smoking a health hazard, leading to several government initiatives to reduce consumption. Tobacco use per capita peaked in the US in the early 60s, leading to lung cancer rates peaking in the mid-80s. In 1970, the Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act became law, leading to stronger health warnings in cigarette packaging and completely banning cigarette advertisements on radio and television. The last cigarette ad on US television aired exactly at 11:59 pm on New Year's day in 1971, so El wouldn't have been exposed to cigarette advertising and associated warnings (except for programming specifically created to educate against tobacco use).

I hope this didn't come across as preachy... that really wasn't my intention. It's just one of those scenarios I think we'll never see on the show but that Eleven would definitely, definitely have to confront after being trapped in a lab for 12 years and suddenly gaining a family.

(Seriously, though, you really shouldn't smoke— it's terrible for you and for everybody around you. /soapbox)

Sorry I've been MIA lately! Have been basically on my deathbed for the past two weeks... thankfully I've been feeling well enough recently that I was able to write this. Fingers crossed my health keeps cooperating!